

To: Inquiry Secretary, HCDSDFVP Committee, abortionlawreform@parliament.qld.gov.au

From: Professor Denis O'Hara,

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."
— Nelson Mandela

How a society understands and responds to the question of termination of pregnancy reflects its beliefs about the value of human life, and at what age we consider a child (including an unborn child) to be a human being.

As a society we, in Australia, would generally consider the value of human life to be very high, being signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is reflected in our protection of life, the medical response to save the life of a child born prematurely, and the punishment of someone who commits murder – even murder of an unborn child. Our termination of pregnancy policies, legal principles and laws should reflect this high value we place on human life.

As a general principle I believe that life is life from conception, as the intention of gestation is to perpetuate life. While different states place a different timeline for considering when termination of pregnancy is legal, whatever the time set (16 weeks or 24 weeks etc), it should be clearly before the baby could survive by itself. If a baby's life can be saved even when born prematurely at 24-28 weeks, this reflects our valuing of that child, and our termination of pregnancy laws should reflect this also.

Certainly factors around the danger to a woman's life can be taken into consideration.

Because there are differences in people's moral beliefs, health providers should be able to make choices about their involvement in termination of pregnancy. The Hippocratic oath reflects nearly two thousand years of western medical practitioners' commitment to doing no harm (and even specifically abortion). For those who consider a foetus to be an unborn child, a human life, they should certainly be given the choice to maintain their commitment to not harming that life. Any position or law which does not provide for this choice would have to be considered totalitarian in nature.

As a counselling and psychology academic I can attest to the fact that when women are given a chance to explore their own responses and those of others to their pregnancy, in a context of confidentiality and no judgement, they are more likely to make decisions in keeping with their own highest desires and morality. Counselling which does not try to persuade the counsellee, but allows exploration of issues, is essential for a person who is facing questions about termination. Research has shown that when women are well informed of the actual development of the foetus, they are much less likely to choose an abortion, women should be fully informed about the facts of the choice they are making.

I do not agree with the argument about a woman's right to make choices about her own body when it concerns abortion, especially if there is no identified risk to the woman. Of course as a general principle, women, as well as men, should have a right to make choices about their bodies. But an unborn child is not a part of the woman's body, it is a new life growing within her body.

While I agree that a democratic society is privileged to raise difficult issues for debate in an open forum without undue restriction, I am deeply concerned that our Queensland and Australian society is even in a position to have to debate the issue of full-term termination.

As Mandela asserts, the soul of our society is deeply at risk if we fail to respect the life of an unborn child.